How Consumer Reports Got It (hearing aids) Wrong

They got it wrong because they focused on the actual physical hearing aid and who manufactured it, rather than focusing on what is more important to someone's success, or lack thereof, with hearing aids.

On January 15, 2019 Consumer Reports published a report called "Best and Worst Hearing Aid Brands and Retailers". They looked at a variety of hearing aid brands that included: Audibel, Beltone, Bernafon, Kirkland, Miracle Ear, Oticon, Phonak, ReSound, Signia, Starkey, Widex and others.

The way they considered how these brands rated from best to worst was based on a survey of 17,626 people. Here is a short sample of the results:

- For battery life brands such as Audibel, Beltone, and NuEar fared less well than the others.
- The Signia and ReSound brands received high marks for some of the situations in which people commonly use hearing aids.
- The Veterans Administration is a good option as a place to obtain hearing aids.

There are many more details from the story of which you may be interested. However, the above sample helps demonstrate what is wrong with the Consumers Report paper. Many of the hearing aid manufacturers produce many of the various brands that the study considered separately. ReSound, for example, makes Beltone hearing aids, Starkey makes NuEar and Audibel, Phonak makes Unitron, Signia makes both MiracleEar and Rexton.

Said differently, a Beltone hearing aid is a ReSound hearing aid that uses slightly tweaked software and a different model of distribution. An Audibel hearing aid is a Starkey hearing aid. A Rexton hearing aid is a Signia hearing aid. There is no reason why a Beltone hearing aid should have received a low mark in one area but ReSound did not, there is no reason why Audibel hearing aids did not do well for battery life, but Starkey did better.

What is the biggest problem of the report? It buys into the common, but false, idea that it is the manufacturer of the hearing aid that is important to the wearer, when actually it is the acoustic characteristics programmed into that hearing aid and how well they match what is needed by the wearer's hearing loss. I can do a good job fitting a Starkey hearing aid and maximize the wearers residual hearing as much as possible with that prosthetic device, or I can do a bad job such that the person heard better without that same Starkey hearing aid.

The Veteran's Administration was rated as a good place to obtain hearing aids although they do not provide hearing aids to the non-Veteran public. Additionally, the Veterans Administration uses and fits hearing aids from various manufacturers, often at no cost to Military Veterans. This is a hint from the study that the manufacturer is low down on the list of what is important, at least for the VA.

If the manufacturer of the hearing aid is not the most important factor to success, what is?

The first thing is an accurate assessment of the wearer's hearing. The way the hearing aid is going to be adjusted for someone with a severe, high frequency sensorineural hearing loss is going to be different than the way a hearing aid will be adjusted for someone with a mild

conductive hearing loss. If the diagnosis is wrong, the hearing aid characteristics are going to be wrong.

The second important factor has to do with the hearing aid's gain and output as a function of sound frequency. Here is how Sanders and others put it in their 2015 audiology text:

"New hearing aid technology is introduced each and every year: there are constant updates to directional microphone algorithms, noise reduction strategies, variations of amplitude and frequency compression, wireless streaming, and audio data transfer between hearing aids, just to name a few. What is sometimes forgotten, however, is the basic programming of the hearing aids' gain and output, which has a significant impact on the patient benefit obtained from these special features. Moreover, while many convenience features have been added to hearing aids in the past few years, understanding speech remains the dominant concern of hearing aid users, and for the most part, this is determined by the frequency-specific gain selected for the patient's instruments." *-Sanders and others, 2015*

So what is a soon-to-be hearing aid wearer to do? Find an expert in hearing and hearing aids and let them guide you in your endeavor to hear better. Do not worry about the brand. You are not going to be fit by a hearing aid manufacturer according to how the hearing aid performs in an artificial ear, you are going to be fit by someone who know your ears, your particular hearing impairment, and then what that hearing aid is doing in your ear.

Is who manufactures the hearing aid important at all? You bet'cha. I'll talk about that in another report.

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